

## **Civil Affairs team protects convoys**

***Three women Soldiers, serving as turret gunners for their Civil Affairs unit, find that their presence generates a positive reaction from the local Iraqi population***

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Three humvees cruise slowly down a city street, the turret gunners scanning the surrounding area for threats. Disinterested neighborhood residents merely glance at them, until one of the gunners abruptly shouts and gestures.

Immediately heads snap around and jaws drop when they hear the sound of female voices and notice the feminine features of the Soldiers behind the machine guns.

With an increased operations tempo, female Soldiers are stepping up to take on some of the roles traditionally filled by males such as providing unit and convoy security.

Some units, including military police, are using an increasing number of females for patrols outside the wire. Despite this, there's often only one female gunner in a particular convoy or patrol at a given time.

What makes the New York-based U.S. Army Reserve unit, A Company, 403rd Civil Affairs Battalion different is that it doesn't have just one female turret gunner, but three. In fact, all of the turret gunners for this particular 10-person CA team are females.

"They point, they look, they're very surprised to see females," said Spc. Amanda N. Godlewski, a chemical observation specialist assigned to the civil affairs unit, recounting the reaction many Iraqis have to seeing a female in the turret.

"They (the Iraqis) used to get really confused," said Spc. Robyn L. Murray, a CA specialist from Niagara Falls, N.Y. "I was the first. I volunteered on the second day we were here."

The CA team that Murray was assigned to needed a gunner who knew how to use a squad automatic weapon. Murray said she jumped at the opportunity to "man" the machine gun in the turret.

Soon after volunteering to take the gunner's position, Godlewski, from Syracuse, N.Y., said she enjoyed being up on top of the humvee, shrugging off the thought of feeling exposed.

Fellow female gunner Spc. Lilly R. Withers, the unit's mechanic, agreed with Murray and Godlewski.

"I wouldn't do anything else," she said.

Withers said the reactions from other U.S. Soldiers occasionally mirrors the initial confusion of the locals. She said most of the other troops she's encountered are receptive to the idea of female gunners and have voiced their support to her. "I do get a few questions," Withers said. "The infantry thought it was strange they (the unit) chose to put us on the guns."

The womens' presence in the turrets has had a positive effect during their civil affairs missions.

"They turn a lot of heads, civilian and military," said their team chief, Cpt. Timothy H. Wright, of Jamestown, N.Y.. "They get a positive reaction from the civilian populace."

Withers said Iraqi women have been very friendly toward her and by judging from their reactions and gestures she feels they are supportive of female Soldiers. She said after the women figure out she's not a man "then, they want to come talk to me, see my eyes and hair," said Cortland, N.Y. native.

The reactions the female gunners get from the public can be very helpful in stressful situations since they get a lot of attention said Wright.

"They get the point across and people listen to their voices," he said.

Wright's 10-person team is larger than a standard civil affairs team since it consists of two teams combined into one due to the team often being outside the relative safety of the forward operating base. Venturing outside the wire is something the female gunners accept.

"I get kind of scared sometimes," said Withers, "but I like to be in control to keep my team safe."

"People call us when they need to go somewhere," said Wright.

With mission tempo in full swing, going "somewhere" is merely a moment away. This means that Wright's civil affairs team covers a lot of ground. Patrolling an area that covers nearly 70 square miles, the Soldiers are out on a daily basis, sometimes running more than one mission a day.

"We have the largest operating area in the al-Rashid district," said Wright. "We are helping out in 43 'muhallahs' or towns."

The civil affairs team stays very busy performing such diverse tasks as identifying and assessing needed projects in their area, helping coordinate U.S. Army work efforts with key Iraqi leaders and collecting data on local attitudes.

Wright said the overall positive reactions resulting from the female gunners' presence has contributed to the success of their missions.

Although the civil affairs team may get a few sideways looks at times, the unit commander has nothing but praise for his female Soldiers.

"I'm proud of them," said Wright. "They listen well and they react when it's needed. They're as motivated and dedicated as any male Soldier I've ever worked with."



**Spc. Robyn L. Murray, Spc. Amanda N. Godlewski and Spc. Lilly R. Withers on top of a humvee, ready to provide security for a mission on the streets of Baghdad. (U.S. Army photo by Capt. Timothy Wright)**